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ABSTRACT

A personalized account of the value of experience as an institutional research director in undertaking the role of college president is provided in this paper. After initial references to the competing demands made of a college presdient, some qualities appropriate to individuals in this office are identified, including: (1) openness to new ideas; (2) the ability to identify problems and state them in a way that others can understand; (3) the capacity to avoid confusing activities with results; (4) skill in asking pertinent questions to clarify matters, identify underlying assumptions, and ensure that both parties understand what is going on; and (5) the capability of evaluating results on the basis of planned objectives. Next, a method of evaluating institutional programs and support services is discussed, based on self-evaluations responding to questions such as what is the purpose of the program, how does it carry out its purpose, and is there a need for changes to make the program more effective. Finally, the importance of a commitment by all college personnel to the process of evaluation is emphasized. (HB)

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A RESEARCHER TURNED COLLEGE PRESDIENT

Frank C. Pearce

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A RESEARCHER TURNED COLLEGE PRESIDENT

I HAVE BEEN ASKED TO ADDRESS MY REMARKS TO WHAT I LEARNED AS A DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH THAT HELPED ME IN MY ROLE AS COLLEGE PRESIDENT. THE ROLE OF COLLEGE PRESIDENT CAN BE DESCRIBED IN MANY WAYS, DEPENDING UPON WHO IS DOING THE DESCRIBING AND WHAT THEY EXPECT. FACULTY OFTEN HOPE TO SIMPLY BE LEFT ALONE, CLASSIFIED STAFF EXPECT TO BE NOTICED, STUDENTS USUALLY HAVE NO EXPECTATIONS, AND MANAGEMENT STAFF COULD DO WITH LESS WAVES. ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE ARE THOSE INDIVIDUALS WHO REQUIRE IN SUCH A POSITION THAT IT BE EVERYTHING TO EVERYONE. OBVIOUSLY, NEITHER EXTREME IS REAL; HOWEVER, EVEN THOUGH IT MAY SEEM STRANGE, ALMOST ANYTHING YOU SET OUT TO ACCOMPLISH CAN SUCCEED OR, WITH THE SAME AMOUNT OF HARD WORK, FAIL. IT IS NO PLACE FOR THOSE WHO REQUIRE A RIGID STRUCTURE, ADMIRATION, OR THE RIGHT ANSWERS. COLLEGE PRESIDENTS MUST BE ACCEPTING OF ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE, ALL SORTS OF VIEWPOINTS AND, ABOVE ALL, CONSIDER UNCERTAINTY AS A WAY OF LIFE. OR, AS A BASKETBALL COACH TOLD ME ONE TIME, IN THIS BUSINESS YOU BETTER KEEP YOUR BAGS PACKED. THROUGH THE TRAVAILS OF ECONOMIC DECLINE OR GROWTH, FACULTY UNREST OR APATHY, CRIES OF REDUCED EDUCATIONAL QUALITY OR IRRELEVANT COURSES, AS WELL AS CRIES FOR RELEVANCE OR FOR JOBS, COLLEGE PRESIDENTS ARE EXPECTED TO BE CALM AND TO LEAD US DOWN THE RIGHT PATH. IF SUCCESSFUL, I ASSURE YOU, IT IS NOT A MATTER OF CHANCE, IT'S BY DESIGN. SOUND LIKE AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK? MAYBE; BUT, AS I SAID IN THE BEGINNING, IT'S MOSTLY A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE. IT'S REALLY NOT TERRIBLY DIFFICULT IF YOU REMEMBER A FEW THINGS AND, OF COURSE, YOU'RE LUCKY:

1. BE OPEN TO NEW IDEAS. BE SUSPICIOUS OF PEOPLE WHO ALWAYS KNOW THE RIGHT ANSWER OR WHO BELIEVE THE MORE THINGS CHANGE THE MORE THEY REMAIN THE SAME. I REMEMBER WHEN I LEFT GRADUATE SCHOOL AND BEGAN CONDUCTING SOME PRACTICAL RESEARCH, I WAS INTERESTED IN WHY SOME TEACHING METHODS WORK SO WELL FOR SOME TEACHERS BUT ARE INEFFECTIVE FOR OTHERS. AFTER CONDUCTING A HOST OF STUDIES DESIGNED TO CONTROL ON ALL THE RELEVANT VARIABLES PLUS NUMEROUS

MULTIVARIABLE STATISTICAL ANALYSES, I FOUND OUT THE DIFFERENCE WAS THE PEOPLE AND NOT THE PROCESS. IF A TEACHER THOUGHT SOME TEACHING PROCESS WAS VERY EFFECTIVE, THEN IT TURNED OUT TO BE TRUE AND THERE WAS A SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT IN STUDENT LEARNING. IT WAS THE TEACHER'S EXCITEMENT, INTEREST, AND COMMITMENT NOT THE PROCESS. THERE IS NO BEST WAY TO TEACH, NO BEST WAY TO ENCOURAGE STAFF DEVELOPMENT, NO BEST WAY TO EVALUATE MANAGERS, DEVELOP A BUDGET, OR PLAN FOR THE FUTURE. IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE ANY GOOD AS A RESEARCHER OR A COLLEGE PRESIDENT, THEN YOU CAN'T HAVE PRECONCEIVED IDEAS ABOUT WHAT WILL WORK AND WHAT WON'T. I BELIEVE YOU SHOULD BE WILLING TO TRY ANYTHING AT LEAST ONCE. AFTER ALL, THE WORST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU IS IT DOESN'T WORK AT THIS TIME IN THIS SITUATION AND THAT IS VERY IMPORTANT INFORMATION. YOU CAN LEARN AS MUCH FROM YOUR FAILURES AS FROM YOUR SUCCESS. IN FACT, I THINK IT IS THE POTENTIAL SUBJECT OF A GREAT BOOK THAT I'M GOING TO WRITE ONE DAY.

2. DEFINE THE PROBLEM. IF YOU CANNOT IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM OR STATE IT IN A WAY OTHER PEOPLE CAN UNDERSTAND IT, YOU MAY REST ASSURED IT CANNOT BE SOLVED. IT TAKES ALL MY LISTENING SKILLS, WHICH ARE ALWAYS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT, TO FIND OUT IF A PERSON IS TELLING ME HOW TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OR IS TELLING ME WHAT IS THE PROBLEM. AS YOU KNOW, THERE IS A GREAT DEAL OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO. IF THEY'RE TELLING YOU HOW TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM, THEN YOU CAN NOD SAGELY AND SAY NOTHING; OR CONGRATULATE THEM ON THEIR GREAT SOLUTION; OR, IF IT'S APPROPRIATE, MUTTER IN CONSOLATION ABOUT MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN; OR NOTE IN ABSOLUTE SILENCE THAT THE SOLUTION BEARS NO RESEMBLENCE TO THE PROBLEM. ON THE OTHER HAND, IF THEY WANT YOUR HELP, THEN YOU'LL HAVE TO FIGURE OUT WHAT IS THE PROBLEM. IT IS HERE THAT YOU CAN REALLY PUT YOUR RESEARCH TRAINING TO THE TEST. ANY COMPETENT TECHNICIAN CAN GATHER AND ANALYZE THE DATA, BUT GATHERING THE RIGHT DATA REQUIRES ONE TO KNOW WHAT

QUESTIONS YOU ARE TRYING TO ANSWER. MEANING, THE PROBLEM MUST BE VERY CLEARLY DEFINED.

RELATED TO THIS SAME ABILITY IS KNOWING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO. I CAN'T TELL YOU HOW MANY ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY I HAVE WORKED WITH WHO CONFUSE ACTIVITY WITH RESULTS. WE ALL KNOW THE PERSON WHO IS BUSY BEYOND BELIEF, THE HUMAN DYNAMO WHO BELIEVES WHEN IN DOUBT DO SOMETHING -- AT LEAST LOOK BUSY. WHAT ARE THEY ACCOMPLISHING? WHO KNOWS, UNLESS WE KNOW WHAT THEIR OBJECTIVES ARE. IF THE INTENT WAS TO BE BUSY, LOOK IMPORTANT, AND IMPRESS PEOPLE WITH THEIR FOOT WORK, WE WOULD HAVE TO JUDGE THEM AS SUCCESSFUL. ON THE OTHER HAND, COLLEGE BOARDS TEND TO JUDGE THEIR PRESIDENTS BY RESULTS. THOSE THAT DON'T PRODUCE CAN GET FIRED, ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO GUARANTEE THAT EVEN THOSE WHO PRODUCE WON'T GET FIRED. THE POINT, HOWEVER, IS THE RESEARCHER AND THE COLLEGE PRESIDENT MUST CLEARLY STATE THE PROBLEM THEY ARE RESOLVING OR THE DIRECTION IN WHICH THEY PLAN TO LEAD BEFORE ANYONE CAN JUDGE THE RESULTS. AS THE WISE OLD SAGE ONCE SAID, "ANY PATH CAN GET YOU THERE IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING." AS A RESEARCHER, I LEARNED HOW TO IDENTIFY AND DEFINE PROBLEMS. AS A COLLEGE PRESIDENT, IT IS AN INVALUABLE SKILL.

3. ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. I DON'T MEAN PICK PEOPLE TO DEATH OR BELITTLE THEM -- ANYONE CAN BE A NITPICKER AND NOT HAVE THE FOGGIEST NOTION ABOUT WHAT IS GOING ON. THE PURPOSE OF GOOD QUESTIONS IS TO CLARIFY, ENSURE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT'S GOING ON, WHAT THE PERSON INTENDS, AND MOST IMPORTANT WHAT ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLIE THEIR ACTION. IT HELPS IF YOU'RE A LITTLE PARANOID IN ASKING QUESTIONS, EVEN IF YOU THINK THE ANSWERS ARE OBVIOUS. A GOOD RESEARCHER UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING ASSUMPTIONS. YET, I -- AS WELL AS YOU, I'M SURE -- HAVE BEEN DOWN MORE BLIND ALLEYS

SIMPLY BECAUSE WE ASSUMED SOMETHING WITHOUT REALIZING IT. MAKING UNIDENTIFIED ASSUMPTIONS IS A LITTLE LIKE THE RESEARCHER WHO SAYS WE NEED TO GATHER DATA FROM ALL THE STUDENTS AT THE COLLEGE TO FIND OUT HOW MANY ATTEND OUR OUT-REACH CENTER AND LIVE WITHIN A 50-MILE RADIUS. YOU ASK WHY AND THE RESPONSE IS IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO KNOW. IF THAT'S THE ONLY REASON, MY RESPONSE IS DON'T DO IT.

REDUCING THE FOG FACTOR IS RELATED TO THE SAME QUALITY OF ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. MANY OF YOU HAVE MET THE PERSON WHO CAN DESCRIBE THE ACCOMPLISH-MENTS OF THE PROGRAM IN GLOWING TERMS, FREQUENTLY PUNCTUATED WITH THE NAMES OF FAMOUS PEOPLE AND NUMEROUS TESTIMONIALS FROM PAST STUDENTS -- NONE OF WHICH MAY HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE PROGRAM. OR YOU MAY KNOW THE ADMINISTRATOR WHO USES THE MUSHROOM MANAGEMENT THEORY OF KEEPING PEOPLE IN THE DARK AND FEEDING THEM HORSE MANURE. OVER THE YEARS, I'VE LEARNED TO SORT OUT THE THE B.S. BECAUSE I RECOGNIZE HOW LITTLE I UNDERSTAND ABOUT THIS WORLD. I'M NOT AFRAID I DON'T UNDERSTAND AND SIMPLY ASK PEOPLE WHAT THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT. GOOD RESEARCHERS LEARN HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS AND SO DO GOOD COLLEGE PRESIDENTS.

4. EVALUATE RESULTS. AS I INDICATED AT THE BEGINNING OF THESE COMMENTS, I DON'T BELIEVE THERE IS ANY ONE WAY TO DO ANYTHING. I AM AN ECCLECTIC -- I'LL TAKE ANY IDEA FROM ANY SOURCE AND ADAPT IT TO FIT THE SITUATION. I LIKE TO THINK ABOUT THE ALTERNATIVES, THE PARAMETERS, AND THE POSSIBLE RESULTS. I TRULY ENJOY PLANNING, THINKING, AND THEN DECIDING WHAT TO DO. A GOOD RESEARCHER MUST CONSTANTLY EVALUATE EVERY PHASE OF THEIR WORK TO ENSURE THEY ARE ON TARGET OR TO DECIDE WHAT CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO GET ON TARGET. THE SAME IS TRUE OF A COLLEGE PRESIDENT -- HE MUST KNOW WHAT HE'S GOING, WAYS TO GET THERE, AND BE WILLING TO EVALUATE THE RESULTS, MODIFY

THE APPROACH USED TO GET TO THE PARTICULAR GOAL, TRY IT AGAIN, EVALUATE AGAIN, AND SO ON.

LET ME SHARE WITH YOU A VERY PRACTICAL EXAMPLE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF EVALUATION BY DESCRIBING SOMETHING THAT I'VE BEEN INVOLVED IN FOR SEVERAL YEARS THAT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT MY RESEARCH EXPERIENCE. WHAT I'M GOING TO DESCRIBE IS A WAY TO EVALUATE THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM AND EACH OF THE SUPPORT SERVICES AT EVERY COLLEGE AND AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL WITHOUT EMPLOYING A DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH. ESSENTIALLY, IT IS A PROCESS WHICH FORCES ALL AREAS OF THE DISTRICT TO EXAMINE THEIR VALUE TO THE TOTAL ENTERPRISE, HOW THEY FIT IN, AND HOW THEY CAN BE IMPROVED.

I NEED TO GIVE YOU A LITTLE BACKGROUND AT THIS POINT ABOUT THE DISTRICT WHERE I WORK. IT'S CALLED WEST VALLEY AND CONSISTS OF TWO COLLEGES. ONE IS WEST VALLEY COLLEGE, LOCATED IN A FAIRLY AFFLUENT PART OF THE SANTA CLARA VALLEY OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, AND THE OTHER IS MISSION COLLEGE, LOCATED IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL CENTER OF THE SILICON VALLEY THAT MANY OF YOU HAVE READ ABOUT. THE COLLEGES ARE QUITE DIFFERENT -- WEST VALLEY'S CURRICULUM IS TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE FARE, WHILE MISSION COLLEGE EMPHASIZES TECHNICAL TRAINING WITH A SPRINKLING OF OTHER COURSES. BASICALLY, MISSION COLLEGE IS LOCATED IN A SINGLE BUILDING AND SERVES PART-TIME STUDENTS WHO ARE CURRENTLY EMPLOYED. WEST VALLEY, ON THE OTHER HAND, IS LOCATED IN A FACILITY THAT I WOULD DESCRIBE AS TYPICAL CALIFORNIA SPRAWL, ALTHOUGH IT'S MUCH PRETTIER THAN MOST, AND THE STUDENTS ARE EMPLOYED PART TIME. THUS, THE MISSION AND CURRICULUM OF EACH COLLEGE IS QUITE DIFFERENT AND THAT'S EXACTLY AS IT SHOULD BE. THE DISTRICT STAFF IS CENTRALIZED SO THAT EACH COLLEGE FOCUSES UPON INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT SERVICES WITH THE DISTRICT TO PROVIDE EVERYTHING ELSE.

WITH THAT BACKGROUND, LET'S RETURN TO THE TOPIC OF EVALUATION WHICH, IN MY OPINION, IS A TOUCHSTONE OF SUCCESS IN EDUCATION. EVALUATION FORCES YOU TO STATE WHAT YOU HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH, HOW WELL YOU ARE DOING, AND WHAT CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO MORE EFFECTIVELY ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS.

IT SEEMS TO ME MOST COLLEGES MAKE THE MISTAKE OF GIVING SOME INDIVIDUAL THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR EVALUATING RATHER THAN REQUIRING THE PEOPLE IN CHARGE OF EACH PROGRAM AND SERVICE TO EVALUATE THEMSELVES. IF YOU HIRE SOMEONE TO DO THE EVALUATING, IT IS VERY EFFICIENT WHILE AT THE SAME TIME VERY DIFFICULT TO GET THE PEOPLE BEING EVALUATED TO USE THE RESULTS IN MAKING NEEDED CHANGES. ANY STUDENT OF CHANGE WILL TELL YOU HOW IMPORTANT IT IS FOR THE PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR IMPLEMENTING CHANGE TO HAVE HAD SOME SAY IN THE DECISION ABOUT WHAT NEEDS TO BE CHANGED. THE ALTERNATIVE, OF COURSE, IS HITTING PEOPLE OVER THE HEAD WITH GREAT FREQUENCY TO GET THEM TO CHANGE. MOST OF US SOON LEARN THAT THAT DOESN'T WORK. PEOPLE NEED TO DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES A CHANGE IS NEEDED AND THEN SOMETHING WILL HAPPEN.

SOME YEARS AGO, THIS TYPE OF THINKING INCLUDING A LOT OF OTHER THINGS I DON'T HAVE TIME TO TOUCH UPON TODAY LED ME TO DEVELOP AN APPROACH -- OR SOME MIGHT CALL IT A MODEL -- THAT THE CHEMISTRY DEPARTMENT OR THE CUSTODIAL SERVICES STAFF COULD USE TO EVALUATE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS. THE MODEL IS FAIRLY SIMPLE, BUT IT DOES REQUIRE PEOPLE TO DO SOME VERY HARD THINKING ABOUT WHY THEY EXIST, WHAT THEY ARE DOING, AND IT TAKES SEVERAL YEARS TO IMPLEMENT DEPENDING UPON THE COMPLEXITY OF THE DISTRICT. IN EFFECT, IT'S SIMPLE ENOUGH TO DESCRIBE BUT VERY DIFFICULT TO IMPLEMENT. IT REQUIRES A GREAT DEAL OF PATIENCE AND TOLERANCE FOR MISTAKES. ITS GREATEST DISADVANTAGE, OF COURSE, IS IT REQUIRES ONE TO THINK -- A VERY DIFFICULT AND TROUBLESOME PROCESS THAT TOO MANY OF US TRY TO AVOID. I WOULD ALSO CAUTION YOU THAT IN THE BEGINNING THE PROCESS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE PRODUCT -- AND THAT IS

VERY HARD FOR SOME PEOPLE TO ACCEPT. THE PROCESS CAN BE DESCRIBED QUITE SIMPLY:

1. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR PROGRAM? WHY DO WE HAVE IT? OR, IF YOU WILL, WHAT WOULD BE MISSED IF THE PROGRAM WERE ELIMINATED?
2. HOW WELL DOES THE PROGRAM CARRY OUT THIS PURPOSE? OR, DO YOU HAVE ANY DATA THAT SHOWS HOW WELL THE PURPOSE IS BEING ACHIEVED?
3. ARE THERE ANY CHANGES NEEDED TO MAKE THE PROGRAM MORE EFFECTIVE?

IN ORDER TO RESPOND TO EACH OF THESE QUESTIONS, YOU WILL IMMEDIATELY FIND OUT THAT YOU MUST DEFINE THE PURPOSE OR GOALS AS OBJECTIVES: YOU WILL NEED TO DECIDE WHAT KINDS OF DATA WILL BE NEEDED AND HOW THOSE DATA CAN BE COLLECTED; AND YOU WILL NEED TO DEVELOP SOME METHOD FOR ANALYZING THE FINDINGS AND THEN ADOPTING A CHANGE STRATEGY FOR YOUR PARTICULAR PROGRAM. FOR THOSE WHO REQUIRE A FULL-BLOWN MODEL OF WHAT I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT, WE HAVE A 17-STEP VERSION THAT, IF FOLLOWED, WILL LEAD ONE TO A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION. PUT IN AS SIMPLE AS POSSIBLE TERMS, HOWEVER, THE CONCEPT WE USE ASKS WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO, HOW WELL ARE YOU DOING, AND HOW CAN YOU IMPROVE.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF WHAT I HAVE BEEN DESCRIBING IS A COMMITMENT BY EVERYONE -- FACULTY TO COLLEGE PRESIDENT -- TO THE PROCESS OF EVALUATION. THE SPECIFIC STEPS CAN VARY TREMENDOUSLY, THE GATHERING OF DATA CAN EVEN BE RATHER SLOPPY, AND THE OBJECTIVES PERHAPS IMMEASUREABLE. THE IMPORTANT THING IS THAT EVERYONE BEGIN THINKING ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH, HOW WELL THEY ARE DOING, AND HOW TO IMPROVE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS. PEOPLE MUST SEE THEIR TIME IS BEING WELL SPENT -- THIS MUST NOT BE A PAPER-PRODUCING EXERCIZE -- AND THAT THE RESULTS HELP THEM TO GET WHAT THEY WANT.

I COULD SPEND THE REST OF MY TIME LEADING YOU THROUGH A SERIES OF DOS AND DON'TS OR HOW TO IMPLEMENT WHAT I'VE SAID. FOR THOSE WHO ARE INTERESTED, THE STEPS I'VE MENTIONED EARLIER ARE OUTLINED IN THE MATERIALS ON THE TABLE OR GIVE ME YOUR CARD AND I'LL MAIL YOU A COPY.

IN MY VIEW, WE ARE BELEAGUERED BY COLLEAGUES WHO CRY WHERE ARE WE GOING IN HIGHER EDUCATION, POLITICIANS WHO PASS LAWS REQUIRING US TO GO IN AS MANY DIRECTIONS AS POSSIBLE AT THE SAME TIME, AND BUREAUCRATS WHO CONFUSE THE PRODUCTION OF PAPER WITH EVIDENCE OF RESULTS. CLEARLY, THE PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IS MULTIFACETED, YET PEOPLE CONTINUE GIVING SIMPLE ANSWERS. WHAT WE NEED ARE GOALS PEOPLE CAN UNDERSTAND, EVIDENCE OF OUR SUCCESS, AND COHERENT RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW WE CAN DO BETTER. IN EFFECT, WE NEED TO TAKE CONTROL OF OUR OWN DESTINY BY HAVING SPECIFIC INFORMATION ON WHAT WE ARE DOING AND HOW IT CAN BE DONE BETTER. IT IS ONLY THEN THAT WE WILL BE IN A POSITION OF LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION. IN MY OPINION, EVALUATION IS CENTRAL TO SUCH A POSITION. THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION.

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